



## Viewpoint: It's time to get rid of nuclear weapons

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By [The Republican](#)

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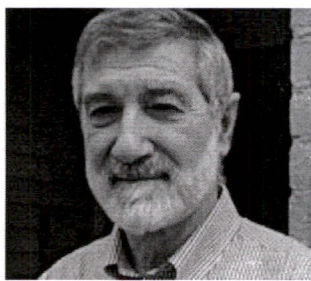
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By **IRA HELFAND**

Last month marked the 50th anniversary of the [Cuban Missile crisis](#), generally regarded as the most dangerous moment of the Cold War.

For 10 days in October 1962, the U.S. and Soviet Union faced off over the Soviet deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba. With inaccurate intelligence about each other's weapons, and an inadequate understanding of the other side's thinking, U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Russian President Nikita Khrushchev tried to defuse the crisis without starting World War III.



Ira Helfand

Recently released documents have shown just how close they came to blundering into the nuclear holocaust they were trying to avoid. The missile crisis riveted the attention of the world. For days, people lived with the very real fear that nuclear war could erupt at any minute.

But the Cuban missile crisis was not unique. There have been many other near misses with nuclear weapons, and these other brushes with disaster did not receive appropriate public attention.

At least five times since 1979, either the U.S., the Soviet Union or [Russia](#) prepared to launch a nuclear attack on the other side in the mistaken belief that they were under attack. On one occasion in 1979, a training tape simulating an all-out Soviet attack was accidentally fed into U.S. military computers, triggering a full alert in which missiles were readied for firing and strategic bombers for takeoff.

On another occasion in 1983, a computer error in the Soviet Union showed incoming U.S. missiles headed for Moscow. The Russian colonel in charge of the radar station chose, on his own, to ignore what his radar screens were showing and not launch a nuclear response.

The most recent of these near misses we know about took place on Jan. 25, 1995, a full five years after the end of the Cold War. On that morning, the U.S. launched a rocket from Norway to study phenomena related to

the northern lights. We notified the appropriate officials in Moscow, but the message was not relayed.

Russian military radar interpreted the rocket as a possible first stage in a U.S. attack. For the only time that we know about, the "Football," the briefcase the Russian leadership carries at all times to respond to nuclear attack, was activated.

Boris Yeltsin, then president of Russia, was awakened at 2 a.m. and given five minutes to decide what to do. Yeltsin had serious health problems, and was a chronic alcoholic who was incapacitated for days a time by his drinking. Then, as now, Russia, and the U.S. operated under a doctrine known as "launch on warning." If they believe that they are under attack, they are supposed to launch a counterattack and not wait for the incoming missiles to explode.

So Yeltsin should have started a nuclear war.

We don't know exactly what happened. Maybe Yeltsin was too drunk to wake up. But the Russian leadership chose not to follow existing doctrine, waited five minutes and was able to verify that the rocket was not headed towards Moscow.

Jan. 25, 1995, was a good day. There was nothing happening anywhere that should have led to war between the U.S. and Russia. And we came within five minutes of blowing up the world.

Since 1995, the conditions which allowed this near disaster have not significantly changed. The U.S. and Russia each maintain more than 1,000 warheads mounted on missiles on hair trigger alert. At any moment the same kind of scenario could play out, and this time we may not be so incredibly lucky.

The danger posed by our nuclear arsenals has been underscored by a report released this year by Physicians for Social Responsibility and our global federation, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. The study show that even a very "limited nuclear war, involving less than 0.5% of the world's nuclear weapons, could cause prompt global climate disruption that cuts food production worldwide and could kill more than a billion people."

An understanding that our luck won't hold forever has led a growing number of countries to call for the abolition of nuclear weapons as the only way to guarantee they are never used.

In mid-October, 35 nations at the UN, citing the danger of nuclear famine in the event of a limited nuclear war, joined in a statement calling for a nuclear weapons convention to establish a concrete, verifiable and enforceable framework for nuclear abolition.

The U.S. should support this effort and lead the way in negotiating such a treaty which is so critical to the security of the American people.

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*Dr. Ira Helfand practices medicine at the Family Care Medical Center on Allen Street. He is a national board member of Physicians for Social Responsibility, and was recently elected co-President of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the recipient of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize.*

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